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ABSTRACT

As a man who took great delight in "the joy of mere words," George Orwell would understandably be appalled by the growing insensitivity to language in today's world. Poetry in composition classes can keep students aware of the music of the English language. There is no guarantee that students will respond to poetry with the same enthusiasm that Orwell showed for it, nor that they will magically produce beautifully written essays like Orwell, but if reading poetry can lead students to listen more attentively to the sound of their own sentences, then a poetry section will have been worth the effort. One composition class covers 25 to 30 poems in 3 or 4 weeks, and once a week, students write a short essay in response to a poem, eventually trying their own poetry. Discussions focus on diction and arrangement of phrases and classes. An exercise in translating poetry into poor prose gives students a much better understanding of what separates good writing from bad. Unfortunately, composition researchers are discouraging this kind of method in favor of the "writing process" paradigm, but teachers and researchers must guard against the temptation to make composition instruction a pseudoscientific practice that overlooks the importance of writing as an art. (HTH)

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"The Joy of Mere Words": Poetry and Composition

In "Why I Write" George Orwell recalls discovering, at about the age of sixteen, "the joy of mere words." By this he means simply taking delight in the sound that certain words make when arranged in a rhythmic pattern. Orwell tells us, for example, that just repeating aloud these two lines from Paradise Lost would send "shivers down my backbone":

> So hee with difficulty and labour hard
> Moved on: with difficulty and labour hee.

As Orwell readily admits, these are hardly Milton's best lines, but that's not the point. What matters is that words suddenly came alive for Orwell; they became more than just black squiggles on a page; they acquired a music of their own that gave pleasure regardless of the meanings of the words themselves. This is not a profound discovery, but the fact that Orwell was so thrilled by it is significant. For it made him care enough about words to use them with sensitivity and grace, and thus it helped to make him a prose stylist worth remembering instead of merely an accomplished journalist or an entertaining novelist. Orwell's example should remind us that good writing must please the ear as well as the mind, and in the present linguistic climate I think this reminder is necessary. As someone who paid careful attention to the sound of his sentences, Orwell was understandably appalled by the growing insensitivity to language in the modern world, and I am afraid he would not find the situation any better if he were alive today. Recent examples of gobbledygook like "inoperative statement" and "survivable retaliatory capability" would no doubt sound depressingly familiar to him. With 1984 quickly closing in on us, I think we need to reemphasize the importance of sharing with our students an appreciation for what Orwell calls "the joy of mere words."

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Despite Orwell's enthusiasm for it, Paradise Lost is probably not the best place for us to begin talking about the music of words with our students, but I want to urge that we make an effort to include poetry of some kind in our composition courses. We can, of course, use prose works to introduce our students to the music of language, but it is so much easier for them to hear the rhythmic patterns in poetry, and in any case the brevity of most poems will help to keep reading assignments from interfering with the time students need for writing. In fact, it is best to read all poems aloud in class. The instructor can do some of this reading at first, but students should have as many opportunities as possible to hear their own voices shape the words of the poems. I am well aware that good old Miss Grundy tried all this fifty years ago in her high school English classes, and with unhappy results, butchering poetry by teaching it with a grim determination to enlighten and instruct. No wonder so many generations of students have grown up feeling uncomfortable with poetry. If it has to be forced down their throats like some foul-tasting medicine, then it is best left alone. But we should not let Miss Grundy's ghost stand in our way. If you can read poetry in a natural, unpretentious voice; if you are willing to discuss it informally; if you can let it touch your students' hearts and avoid being sentimental or moralistic about it; if, above all, you can let the poetry sing, then you need not worry about following in Miss Grundy's footsteps.

There can be no guarantee that students will respond to poetry with the same enthusiasm that Orwell showed for it, nor indeed that they will magically produce beautifully written essays like Orwell's "Shooting an Elephant" simply because their minds have soaked up a lot of poetry. If that is the way it worked, we would all be turning out terrific prose and poetry after dipping into a volume of Keats or Tennyson. There are no easy answers to the problems that any of us have with writing, but something must be done to give students

a better sense of how words can work together to produce harmonious sounds. They need desperately to see good writing in concentrated, powerful bits, such as we find in poetry, for so much of the language they are exposed to is dull and empty. Why should we expect them to pay careful attention to their own writing when a good deal of the prose they see in newspapers, magazines, and textbooks shows so little care? If reading poetry can lead our students to listen more attentively to the sound of their own sentences, then a section on poetry in our composition classes will have been worth more than a hundred freewriting sessions or sentence-combining drills. Indeed, many of our students' most common errors--fused sentences, choppy sentences, fragments--could be dealt with more effectively if our students would make an effort to read their sentences out loud and to note carefully the rhythm of their words. They need to practice what Roland Barthes has called "writing aloud." Such writing gives us, Barthes says, a "language lined with flesh, a text where we can hear the grain of the throat" (The Pleasure of the Text, p. 66).

In my own composition classes I usually include a short section on poetry that lasts three or four weeks and covers twenty-five or thirty poems. Once a week I have my students write a short essay in response to the poems they have read, and after a couple of weeks I give them a chance to write a poem or two of their own. The poets we read range all the way from Shakespeare to Sylvia Plath, but regardless of the poets I assign, I always try to choose relatively simple poems that most students can understand without too much difficulty. I am speaking here of poems like Yeats's "The Lake Isle of Innisfree," Eliot's "Preludes," and Roethke's "Elegy for Jane." Although I give some attention to rhyme and meter, I concentrate most of my attention in class on discussions of diction and the arrangement of phrases and clauses, since these are major areas of concern for the writer of prose as well as for the poet. For example, in these two lines from Yeats I might discuss the poet's skillful use of

parallel clauses:

> There midnight's all a glimmer, and noon a purple glow,
> And evening full of the linnet's wings.

To help my students appreciate the music in lines like these, I sometimes find it useful to translate the poetry into bad prose. You may recall that Orwell, in "Politics and the English Language," does this sort of thing with a passage from the King James Version of Ecclesiastes. Thus the beautiful sentence, "I returned and saw under the sun, that the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong," gets translated this way: "Objective consideration of contemporary phenomena compels the conclusion that success or failure in competitive activities exhibits no tendency to be commensurate with innate capacity." After seeing several translations like this one, my students begin to show a much better understanding of what separates good writing from bad.

Unfortunately, many of the specialists in composition research are urging us to move away from methods of instruction like the one I am suggesting. They want to see a more scientific approach to writing, and thus would prefer that we not waste our students' time with a lot of poetry when we could be working on what the specialists like to call the "composing process." (The word "writing," I suppose, would sound too unscientific.) Reading the prose of some of these specialists is, however, a rather curious experience. They may be experts in the science of composing, but I am not sure they know much about the art of writing. Looking through an issue of Research in the Teaching of English, an NCTE journal devoted primarily to composition research, one would be hard pressed to discover "the joy of mere words." Consider, for example, this sentence from a recent article on something called "semantic abbreviation": "Because everyday spoken language operates by sharing the construction of meaning among the parties involved, and because spoken language operates in relatively close proximity to cultural and situational referents, the speaker's assumption that language can be used to indicate or point to unspoken contexts

which support and complete the structuring of meaning, works quite well" (RTE, February 1981, p. 26). How frightening it is to think of a writer like this teaching innocent students the "composing process." If students are encouraged to produce this sort of writing, then who can blame them for being indifferent to language? There is no music in this sentence, no pleasing arrangement of sound. Reading it aloud leaves one breathless and irritable. Indeed, it is painful to hear this dry prose limp along from line to line. It is loaded with vague nouns and strings of prepositional phrases, but strong verbs are hard to find. The main verb, "works," does not appear until we have slugged our way through no less than fifty-two words. After all that abstract language the phrase "works quite well" finishes the sentence with an awful thud. No one with a good ear for language would leave that main verb and the two adverbs hanging lifelessly at the end of the sentence. But then no one with a good ear would write phrases like "noncontingent response register," "schema-creative information," "stimulus-based meaning," "hypothesis-revising process," "composing episodes," "operational goals," or "protocol analysis," all of which appear in a recent issue of Research in the Teaching of English (October, 1981). The sad fact is that jargon, convoluted syntax, and weak verbs plague much of the writing in this journal.

I certainly do not mean to suggest that composition research is unnecessary. On the contrary, I think it can be very helpful if the composition researchers develop a better sense of what constitutes good writing. For how can they speak with authority about writing if their own prose is muddled and flat? What we must guard against is the temptation to make composition instruction a pseudo-scientific practice that overlooks the importance of writing as an art. Helping a student to achieve what the researchers like to call "syntactic maturity," i.e. good writing, will mean nothing if the student ends up writing sentences that sound as though they came from a robot. We can experiment with

heuristics and sentence-combining, but let us also keep a place in our courses for Shakespeare, Donne, Keats, and T. S. Eliot. Let us, in other words, keep a place for the sound of the human voice speaking at its best. Let us celebrate the beauty of language with our students; let us give them a reason to respect language to think of it as something more than just words, words, words.

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